

"The deconstruction and reconstruction of sports coaching: an interview with Professor Robyn Jones": A commentary

Luciana De Martin Silva

Introduction

I have recently completed my PhD under Robyn's supervision. My first encounter with Robyn made me realise that we had many commonalities in the way we perceive and conduct research in sports coaching. Not surprisingly, I adopted the constructivist-interpretive paradigm [4] in my study, of which the aim was to make sense of students' learning experiences and identity changes throughout their three year degree course. Here, in line with the paradigm's ontological and epistemological premises, I expected experiences to be locally constructed and co-created by myself (as the researcher) and the students (as the participants) [9]. In order to achieve such aim and avoid an "epistemological misalignment" (as mentioned by Jenkins when referring to Robyn's work), the following three methods of data collection were used: video diaries, reflective logs and focus group interviews.

An emotional experience

The process of doing my PhD has undoubtedly been an invaluable learning experience during which I 'lived' the aspects that I was exploring. Frequent meetings with Robyn encouraged me to consider different (at times conflicting) positions. Here, his use of open ended questions while providing guidance was key in developing my reflexive activity. It also resulted in moments of frustration (especially when under perceived stressful situations). The deeper I delved into the research process (and into literature on learning and identity), the more aware I became of my thoughts and myself. This awareness came about with moments of uncertainty (and reflexivity) resulting in emotional outcomes. One of my PhD reflective diary entries illustrates my thoughts:

The most interesting thing is that although I am analysing how the students' identities are changing I feel like I am going through the same process. I am a student, a lecturer, a footballer (although I feel this part of my identity has become weaker in the past year). Losing who I am is bothering me...(a minute of silence and tears start coming out of my eyes)...I tried to resist...I didn't want them to see me crying, but it was too late!!!

Robyn looks at me and says: Are you ok? I try to say yes but it was clear that something was going on. I was going through a period of transition and just had that feeling of ‘naked self’. (Researcher’s reflective journal, April 2012) [3, p. 106]

“That was the day when our PhD meeting turned into a walk around campus to get some fresh air and wipe the tears away” [3, p. 213]. I really felt that Robyn was being ‘sensitive to the needs of the moment’ (an aspect he alluded to in his interview with Jenkins). It was like he was studying the environment (noticing) before addressing any content we were to discuss. Here, the act of steering (as opposed to controlling) made me feel more responsible for and committed to my own decisions, an aspect that is key in developing an identity [10].

Living with uncertainty

In the initial stages of my PhD, I felt very uncomfortable in moments of uncertainty. This may seem ironic when adopting an interpretivist approach to research, which contemplates a relativist (i.e., the existence of multiple realities) instead of a dualist view of the world (i.e., right/wrong). I remember feeling apprehensive with my choice of data analysis, wishing I could be told I was doing the ‘right thing’ (something Robyn would not explicitly say). Despite such initial concern, living with uncertainty was key in my personal and professional development as the following excerpt illustrates:

I thank those moments for the progress I made as a researcher. And, most importantly, I thank my supervisor for not giving me ‘yes/no’ answers when I may (certainly) have looked for them”. I tended to spend hours thinking about a way of doing something (e.g., organising the data), when suddenly it clicked and ended up with a “yes” in the middle of the office! The moments of uncertainty that led to discoveries were key in my development. I have learned that uncertainty is part of life and that it should not be seen as detrimental to development. Instead, it was the catalyst for my own development (both personally and professionally). [3, p.216]

During my PhD years, Robyn challenged me to think ‘outside of the box’ by questioning my assumptions or dominant social understandings (as mentioned by Jenkins). One of his favorites questions was ‘so what?’. In this sense, I learned to ‘stretch’ my thinking and develop my

thoughts in richer and more meaningful ways. Here, the use of a written reflective journal and a video diary (also used by the participants as mentioned previously) allowed me to clarify internal dialogues regarding different aspects of my study. It acted as a “springboard for interpretations and more general insight” [5, p. 8]. Here, I saw myself reflecting about my role on the study as well as how my experiences held potential to impact my interpretations of the data [2, p. 186]. Despite such concern, Robyn made me realise (and feel comfortable with) the idea that as the researcher, I was the one “who actively constructs the collection, selection and interpretation of data” [5, p. 5), rather than “someone who extracts knowledge from observations and conversations and then transmits knowledge to an audience” [1, p. 388]. Despite recognizing multiple realities, working with Robyn made me aware of ‘social understandings’, which means the realities created have some form of social agreement that make them possible, rather than “a collapse into total relativism or uncritical post-modern ‘anything goes’” [7, p. 2010], something that Jenkins referred to in his article.

Conclusion

Overall, working within a relativist and subjective agenda under Robyn’s supervision was not easy. Here, challenges and uncertainties were inherent aspects of what I considered a very demanding yet extremely rewarding experience. Interestingly, Robyn’s definition of coaching (also presented in the article by Jenkins) also represents how I experienced research under his supervision; that is, a “complex socio-pedagogical process” [6, p. 159] that is “non-linear” [7, p. 211] and “characterised by an ineradicable element of ambiguity” [8, p. 126]. There was no doubt that Robyn ‘lived his theories’ (an aspect alluded to in the interview), which inspired me to do the same. In this context, a process of self-dialogue and mutual collaboration motivated and challenged me to search for new ways of knowing. More importantly, it helped me to seek an increased acceptance of uncertainty and a better understanding of who I was in the research process.

References

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